

## THE VANDERBILT LITERARY MOVEMENT

BY HERSCHEL BRICKELL

ALL followers of developments in contemporary American literature have been aware to a greater or lesser degree of notable activity in and around Vanderbilt University, which made its conspicuous beginnings shortly after World War I came to a close, and which may have suffered a momentary suspension because of existing circumstances, but which no one should hasten to bury. Richmond Croom Beatty, who watched much of the movement as a participant, has assembled a collection of shorter prose pieces and poetry that is a valuable record of

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one of the liveliest and most controversial movements of its kind ever to have one of our universities for its center. Mr. Beatty says in his foreword, "By Way of Background," that in the last twenty-five years Vanderbilt men have produced more books than anyone has undertaken to count, and the answer to this statement, probably not to be disputed, is that a complete bibliography would have been a useful addition to the volume in hand.

Who deserves the credit for what has happened at Vanderbilt? Mr. Beatty says, first of all, Dr. Edwin Mims as head of the Department of English, who thought writers might be employed to teach writing, and who employed as faculty members John Crowe Ransom and Donald Davidson. Further, there were other professors on the campus whose minds were alive, and what is even more striking, the movement was from the beginning a town-and-gown affair. Nashville is a college town, with a genuine intellectual life, and provided the proper atmosphere for the collegiate buds to blossom in. It was in this setting that the once-famous magazine of verse, *The Fugitive*, came to be born in April, 1922. It lasted until December, 1925, having established itself as one of the most interesting ventures in its class, and what is more remarkable still, it closed its books with a cash surplus! People wondered about the title, wondered what the young men of Vanderbilt had to flee from, and were told—at least Corra Harris was told by Donald Davidson—that the editors were "determined to flee from the extreme of conventionalism, whether old or new," adding: "They expect to keep in touch with and to utilize in their work the best qualities of modern poetry, without at the same time casting aside as unworthy all that is established as good in the past."

Other collections of verse appeared, and some of the numerous books Mr. Beatty mentions, but the book that made Vanderbilt a storm center for months was a symposium called "I'll Take My Stand," which appeared in 1930 and

in which an even dozen Southerners came out for Agrarianism as against Industrialism. Their attack could hardly have been timed more aptly, considering the state of the nation at the moment. (Momentarily, many people had become *Agrarians*, at least individually, in order to eat.)

There were just four members of the Fugitive group represented in the volume: John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren. The other eight were Lyle Lanier, Frank L. Owsley, and John Donald Wade of the Vanderbilt faculty; Henry B. Kline, a graduate student; Andrew Lytle, H. C. Nixon, John Gould Fletcher, and Stark Young. There was only one edition, and that not large, but a dozen eloquent Southerners could not thus openly declare themselves against Progress without resounding repercussions. Some of us recall the row and even took part in it, but the truth is, as one of the contributors said, that the book "was more thoroughly denounced and misapprehended by more people who never read it than any other volume in American literature."

The contributors did not content themselves with pointing out the evils of Industrialism, which they saw as the arch-enemy of both happiness and security; they went much farther and said, in effect, that farming, for which Agrarianism is simply a fancy name, was "the best and most sensitive of vocations, and should therefore have the economic preference and enlist the maximum number of workers." (On this basis, China would be the ideal country.) They defined this Agrarian society as "one in which agriculture is the leading vocation, whether for wealth, for pleasure, or for prestige—a form of labor that is pursued with intelligence and leisure, and that becomes the model to which other forms approach as well as they may." They declared that "religion could hardly be expected to flourish in an industrial society," intimating, at least, that God was on the side of the farmers. In fact, they were dogmatic about the whole affair, and while many of the practical details were missing, such as how to

farm with leisure and without machinery, they were certain enough of their ground to arouse tremendous antagonism, which resulted in many epithets such as Neo-Confederates, and so on. Debates took place with thousands listening, and like the books written by Vanderbilt men, as yet uncounted, nobody has bothered to add up the hundreds of columns of newspaper stuff written around the argument.

From the beginning the Agrarians managed peacefully to occupy the same bed only on the common ground of antagonism to what they looked upon as the uglier features of Industrialism, and as time went on, the movement became more and more miscellaneous. It was carried forward by the *American Review* (successor to the *Bookman*), founded in 1933 by Seward Collins, who announced that certain Anglo-Catholics such as Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton, who were Distributists, were also good Agrarians, and the upshot of this slightly odd wedding to the Vanderbilt group was the publication in June, 1936, of another highly controversial book called "Who Owns America," edited by Herbert Agar and Allen Tate, followed by a "Statement of Principles" from the original Agrarians and some others and obviously aimed at the Communists of the period, since it included the statement that "No country can be reformed by people who hate it."

It is no easy task to get at anything perfectly definite that all these people wanted and that they considered good for their country. But one point on which they all seemed to agree was that it would be a pity for the South to cease to be Southern. On the Agrarian side, at least, much of the South's agriculture is based on money crops and is therefore essentially industrial, but this is cavilling. The reader will easily gather from Mr. Beatty's volume that its contributors think the South is something special and ought to be kept so, a point of view with which all of us who believe that everything special ought to be kept so, if possible, are in full agreement. For example, Allen Tate, in an essay called

"The Profession of Letters in the South," a profession which, incidentally, has never existed, declares that it will never exist until we have an independent machinery of publication, in other words, Southern publishing houses. The reason: "that the Southern writer would not have to run the New York gauntlet, from which he emerges with a good understanding of what he can and cannot do."

The implied logic of this statement is that if Southern writers could only run their own geographical gauntlet they would not have to learn "what they can and cannot do." This is a surprising thing for anyone as intelligent and well informed as Mr. Tate to say, since he knows that thus far at least Southerners buy or even read very few books and even fewer of the kind Mr. Tate and his sophisticated friends write. Thus, without a form of magic as yet not discovered or invented, the Southern publisher, even if he had money enough so that barrels of red ink could not frighten him, would not be able to provide readers for his authors, and even if he subsidized them to the point where they could be professional literary men, they would be denied the satisfaction of being read and appreciated. Confessing to the possibility of a personal bias because of the many years the writer of this review has spent in New York, most of them in close association with publishing, it seems to him very doubtful indeed that a much greater degree of freedom can at present be devised than is enjoyed by American writers. New York gauntlet and all. What Mr. Tate either does not see, or does not wish to see, is that the so-called New York gauntlet is no more than the gauntlet of American public taste, and alas, there is no evidence to sustain the belief that the South has any higher taste than any other section. Statistics indicate the contrary.

It is easy to see from the foregoing that the Vanderbilts are people who arouse differences of opinion, for which we ought to be grateful. Mr. Beatty's book contains 397 pages, with thirteen examples of narrative, none of

them remarkable in quality; nine essays, several of them excellent, and including "A Statement of Principles" of the Agrarians; forty-three poems, a number of them, such as Allen Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" already well-known; and brief biographies of the authors. It is quite uneven in the purely literary merit of its selections, but well worth putting together as a record. The Vanderbilt group has unquestionably exercised a wide influence on our letters and sometimes on our blood pressures. One hopes that it will remain a vital force when World War II is over.